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In the spring of 1969, Brown University adopted a new, flexible and progressive undergraduate curriculum. The movement for curricular reform began in late 1966 when a group of Brown students headed by Ira Magaziner, '69, formed a Group Independent Studies Project to examine undergraduate education at Brown. The Group released a 450-page report 15 months later on shortcomings of US higher education with specific recommendations for curricular reform at Brown. While a Special Committee examined the report, campus-wide discussions were held on its principles and proposals. After the Committee issued its INTERIM REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS, the faculty debated the report for 3 days and on May 8, 1969, approved the new curriculum. An underlying assumption of the new curriculum is that education must be judged by its effect on the intellectual, aesthetic and moral growth of the student. Only the student can evaluate the extent to which his education satisfies these needs for personal development, so he must be willing and be permitted to assume responsibility, in major part, for the direction of his own education. New seminar courses and extensive counseling procedures should increase and improve collaboration between students and teachers. "Modes of Thought" courses replace traditional freshman offerings; distribution requirements are eliminated; individual concentration programs are stressed; and grading will be on an "A B C" or "Satisfactory" basis. (JS)

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Freedom to Learn

A new curriculum for
Brown & Pembroke

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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In the spring of 1969, Brown University and Pembroke College adopted what is in many respects, the most flexible and progressive undergraduate curriculum to be found in any major American university today. In a period of widespread campus unrest, the new curriculum at Brown is a remarkable example of orderly change and cooperation among faculty, students, and administrative officers.

The movement to reform the curriculum began late in 1966 when a group of Brown and Pembroke students – meeting in a Group Independent Studies Project – set out to examine undergraduate education at Brown. Fifteen months later, these students released a comprehensive 450-page report on shortcomings in American higher education, with specific recommendations for Brown and Pembroke.

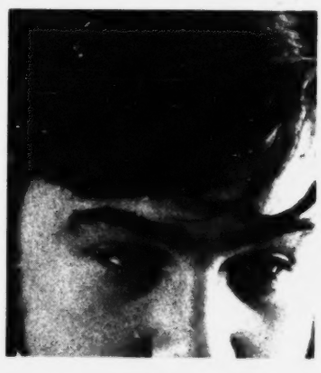
The report, which sociologist David Riesman called "a Herculean effort, an impressive document," became the subject of discussion on the campus for the next year. President Ray L. Heffner first appointed a student-faculty committee to consider the report; then he established the Special Committee on Educational Principles to examine the philosophy underlying the undergraduate curriculum at Brown and to make recommendations.

As the Special Committee worked on an interim report in the spring of 1969, at least a thousand students became involved in curriculum reform. Small groups of students met with individual faculty members to discuss principles and proposals; students held teas and sherry hours in dormitories and fraternity houses to stimulate discussion of the curriculum.

On May 6, 1969, the Special Committee issued its *Interim Report and Recommendations*. The faculty met for three consecutive days in an unprecedented marathon session to debate the report. Classes were suspended so that the entire university community could participate. On May 8, the faculty approved the new curriculum.

One faculty member who served on the Special Committee has written:

"The new curriculum makes a number of radical departures from past practices and principles, but the underlying motivation is the desire to modify an existing tradition rather than to subvert it. In the same manner in which constitutional amendment preserves the integrity of a political order, curricular reform, even the most 'revolutionary,' is an expression of trust in the capacity of existing institutions to change in order to satisfy newly felt needs and to pursue new purposes."



Modes of Thought Courses. One of the most difficult problems which the new curriculum endeavors to confront is the nature of the students' first encounter with university education. Complaints about the freshman year have long been a universal part of college experience. Courses that freshmen are required to take, so the familiar argument runs, are all too often huge and featureless agglomerations of unmotivated students and indifferent instructors, barren of any great sense of intellectual commitment on either part, and likely to be felt as a burden by all involved. Too often, again, freshmen find most of their time consumed by courses that bear no identifiable relationship to each other, fragments of a structure reverently called "Knowledge" for which the builder's plan seems to have been mislaid by some negligent predecessor.

Such criticisms are as familiar as they are widespread, but that does not mean that they are unfounded. The remedy may seem obvious, but that, in turn, does not mean that it is easy to administer. Clearly what we should do to revitalize freshman education is:

☐ Accommodate as many freshmen as possible in small and informal classes for a major part of their time;

☐ Bring them into direct and stimulating contact with instructors who are enthusiastic about what they are teaching and how they teach it;

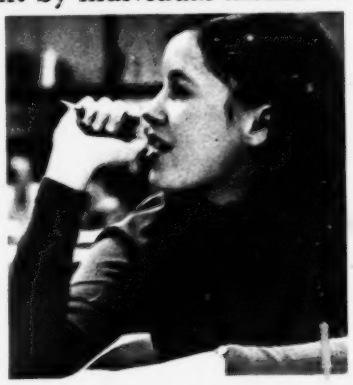
☐ De-emphasize the kind of specialized content that sometimes finds its way into introductory surveys and leads to a premature narrowing of the students' tastes and interests;

☐ Emphasize instead the underlying concepts that relate one area of inquiry to another;

☐ And encourage constant and uninhibited communication among students and between students and teacher, unhindered by the constraints that may derive from the sudden confrontation with a mass of strange material dispensed by an unfamiliar authority.

These, in brief, are the ideas that lie behind the Modes of Thought program.

Modes of Thought courses will be taught by individual members of the faculty, independent of departmental sponsorship, and a course will remain in the curriculum only as long as the instructor who originates the course desires to continue teaching it. Many Modes of Thought courses will be organized around themes that transcend the usual confines of a discipline. A course on "Revolution," for example, might combine materials from the



The assumption underlying the new Brown-Pembroke curriculum is that education does not exist for itself, but for those who seek it; its quality, therefore, must be judged by the effect that it has on the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral growth of the student.

Only the student can, in the final analysis, evaluate the extent to which his education satisfies these needs for personal development. The student must be willing, and must be permitted, to assume responsibility, at least in major part, for the direction of his own education.

This does not mean that the student must make his way alone. The faculty, in approving the new curriculum, has committed itself to a substantial increase in the time and energy it devotes to undergraduates, particularly to freshmen.

New seminar-type courses and new counseling procedures are being established to enhance an intimate and mutually rewarding collaboration between students and teachers. Hopefully, the student will become aware of the values held by his teachers and of the rationale behind them, and this should help him to understand and appreciate his own values.

Although the new curriculum stresses self-motivation and freedom from artificial restrictions, it preserves a commitment to rigorous academic study. Intensive and in-depth inquiry into a particular field of study remains the focal point of the undergraduate experience at Brown and Pembroke.

Under the new curriculum, however, students, with the help of faculty advisers, will work out their individual patterns of concentration to meet their particular needs and interests. Quantity requirements having been removed, the student will be charged with the responsibility for maintaining a sense of proportion and balance in the way in which he takes advantage of the opportunity available to him.

In keeping with the spirit of self-motivation and individual responsibility inherent in the new curriculum, the grading system at Brown and Pembroke has been substantially revised. The new system is designed to bring students and teachers closer together and to provide a more thoughtful evaluation of academic achievement that will help the student to assess his own performance.

literature of political philosophy, empirical political theory, history, perhaps even the humanities, in an attempt to comprehend not only what revolution is, as an historical and political experience, but also what men have understood it to be and how they have seen its effect upon their lives.

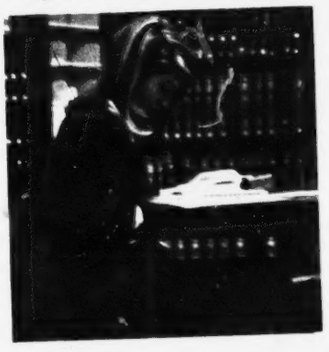
Again, "Man and Environment" might serve as the theme of a course that would incorporate materials drawn from several of the life sciences and go even beyond this to issues of social consequence. The possibilities for courses that are both academically sound and intellectually provocative seem virtually unlimited.

Finally, it is anticipated that over a period of several years enough Modes of Thought courses will be offered so that incoming students will have ample opportunity to make use of these courses as a transition to the work they will be doing during the remainder of their academic careers at the University.

If these hopes are realized, the freshman year will become a provocative and rewarding initiation into university life, the benefits of which will accrue to the entire University in the form of highly motivated students capable of pursuing their studies with a greatly enhanced sense of individual responsibility and initiative.

Distribution. Under the new curriculum, distribution requirements are conspicuous by their absence. This means that it is no longer a University-regulated obligation of the student to distribute his course of study across a given range of subjects, sampling a number of disciplines in the process of becoming "liberally educated." Presumably, this also means that students will be deprived of what is reported to have been a favorite undergraduate pastime, the game of devising means to beat "the system."

In doing away with all distribution requirements, the faculty went somewhat beyond the recommendations of the Special Committee, which had included a proposal that freshmen and sophomores should be required to take a minimum of five and a maximum of seven Modes of Thought courses. The purpose of this recommendation was twofold. It was intended to insure a degree of latitude in the student's initial intellectual involvement at the University, and at the same time to emphasize, especially in the freshman year, intellectual attitudes more in keeping with the demands of university education than those which most incoming students bring with them from secondary school.



Size, however, is crucial to the success of the Modes of Thought courses as

they are envisioned. With larger incoming classes in prospect, the requirement that all freshmen should take at least five Modes of Thought courses would mean that, if these courses were to remain at the optimal 20-student enrollment level, between two and three hundred such courses would have to be available at all times. This, in the opinion of a majority of the faculty, would place a great strain on the University's resources and would almost certainly have compelled a massive redirection of effort from the teaching of advanced undergraduate and graduate courses to a general preoccupation with the instruction of freshmen.

Some concern was also voiced lest the element of compulsion inherent in the requirement run counter to the stress placed elsewhere in the new curriculum on the importance of student responsibility and initiative. As a result of these considerations, both pragmatic and principled, the Modes of Thought requirement was eliminated, and with it the old distribution system.

The expectation remains, however, that under the new curriculum the students will, with few exceptions, continue to distribute their studies in accordance with their own interests and capabilities, assisted by a more effective and conscientious counseling service. If this expectation is fulfilled a liberal education at Brown will, to the degree that it is self-motivated, reflect genuine and enduring personal accomplishment.

Concentration. It has long been possible at Brown, for students who are interested in doing so and prepared to take the necessary initiative, to devise in consultation with one or more faculty sponsors an individual pattern of concentration courses to satisfy particular needs and interests.

In the past, however, relatively few students have taken advantage of this option, partly out of ignorance of its existence and partly because of the procedural red tape involved in securing permission for concentration programs of this type. The great majority of the undergraduates have concentrated in programs established by departments and interdepartmental committees, programs which sometimes suit and sometimes frustrate individual concerns and aspirations.

The new concentration requirements differ from the old more in emphasis than in substance. Greater stress is laid on the usefulness of *individual* concentration programs, under faculty sponsorship and subject to the approval of a newly created Committee on Concentrations, in the hope that such programs

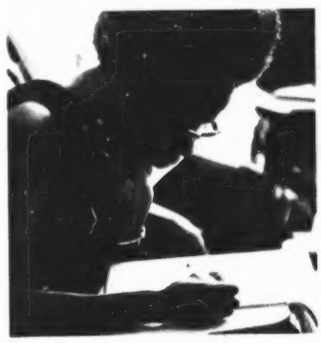
will become, if not the rule, at least less of an exception than at present. Departments, however, will continue to offer "standard" concentration programs, as in the past, again subject to the approval of the Committee on Concentrations.

The most striking change in this area is the removal of quantity requirements for concentration. This will probably mean that in the future some concentration programs will be accepted which have fewer than the present requirement of eight courses, and some which have more. Taken together with the abolition of the distribution requirements which in the past have accounted for a fair proportion of the students' time, this opens the way for early, intensive – and in a certain sense, narrow – concentration in a given area. If this were to become a widespread pattern of student behavior it would be contrary to the intent of the new curriculum as a whole. Faculty sponsors, departments and the Committee on Concentrations will presumably exercise a restraining influence to counteract such a tendency.

The effect of the new system is simply to remove the artificial restraints which have, to some degree, encouraged students to think of "education" in terms of specified numbers of courses symmetrically apportioned into distinct categories. While there is no longer a curricular restriction to prevent a student from taking a 25-course "concentration" in history, or English, or physics, for example, there is also less likelihood now that the student who wishes to satisfy substantial interests in, say, both English and political science, will find himself frustrated by the competing demands on his time of conflicting requirements.

The underlying assumption is that the students themselves must, in the end, be charged with the responsibility for maintaining a sense of proportion and balance in the manner in which they choose to take advantage of the opportunities that the University offers them.

Evaluation. The system of evaluation – or, in more familiar language, the grading system – is one of the most radical, and therefore controversial, aspects of the new curriculum.



The evaulation system adopted by the faculty is a simple one. Henceforth all course work will be graded at the discretion of the instructor, on either an "A B C" basis or simply as "Satisfactory." Students enrolled in courses graded on the A B C basis may opt to have their performance evaluated as Satisfactory. Under the new system no credit will be given for unsatisfactory

(or failing) work, and the course which is not completed satisfactorily will not be entered on the student's transcript.

The main check on a student's progress through the University will be his ability to complete satisfactorily (or with a grade of A, B, or C) a specified number of courses at given intervals: six by the end of his first year, 13 by the end of his second year, 21 by the end of his third year, and 28 in order to graduate. Failure to meet this requirement will result in action by the Committee on Academic Standing.

Behind this frontal assault on the time-honored methods of grading student performance lies a long history of dissatisfaction with the grading system – a dissatisfaction by no means confined to Brown, and shared in probably equal measure, albeit for different reasons, by both students and faculty.

Many teachers are convinced that grades provide at best a faculty index of what a student has or has not accomplished in a given course – cryptic notations that reflect, almost by necessity in many cases, highly subjective judgments, but that assume the character of precise and objective standards once they have been entered on the student's permanent record.

The students themselves raise other objections. Grades, they argue, have become by virtue of the importance attached to them from kindergarten through college, an objective of greater concern to students than education itself. More than any other single factor, student critics blame the grading system for injecting into the classroom, and into the student-teacher relationship, the air of constraint, of contrived and coercive authority, that is so damaging to the encouragement of rewarding relationships and genuinely creative intellectual enterprise.

The new evaluation system at Brown and Pembroke is an imaginative attempt to meet these criticisms while continuing to provide a basis for determining whether or not a student is discharging his minimal obligations. The retention of the "A B C" category, possibly only as a transitional measure until the effect of the new system can be evaluated, will serve the interests of those students and members of the faculty in whose judgment the identification of outstanding academic performance is crucial, for personal or professional reasons.

The hope is, however, that the "Satisfactory"/no credit option will be adopted by an increasing number of students and teachers, and that in consequence a de-emphasis on the importance of grades, and an easing of the emotional

tensions that grades engender, may result.

The abolition of failing grades is not (as some critics of the new system have suggested) an attempt to disguise from the students the harsh reality that life holds its failures as well as its successes. With the elimination of the anomalous grade of D ("passing but unsatisfactory") the new system will, hopefully, encourage a raising, rather than a lowering, of academic standards. The fact of failure will, of course, still exist, though it will no longer lay claim to immortality by means of the official transcript. When failure occurs, that fact will be registered where presumably it will perform its most useful function – that is, with the student himself.

In bare outline, then, these are the structures around which the new Brown-Pembroke curriculum is built. The Special Committee on Educational Principles is continuing its work and will soon make additional recommendations related to the curriculum.

One of these will be to expand opportunity for independent study by individuals or groups of students. Brown was one of the first institutions to make the concept of independent study an important part of the curriculum.

Another pertains to the development of a program of "University Courses," multidimensional courses similar in some respects to the Modes of Thought courses but designed primarily for upperclassmen and conducted at a concomitantly more advanced level of analysis.

The success of the curricular experiment at Brown will depend in large measure on the effectiveness of the counseling system. The Special Committee will soon propose a revised counseling system that will not only convey essential information about educational matters, but which will also help the student to integrate the "academic" and "non-academic" experience of undergraduate life.

The new curriculum is experimental. It will be subjected to continuous reexamination over the next several years to determine whether it is fulfilling the purposes it is intended to serve. If the experiment is to succeed, the faculty, for its part, must make the extra commitment to undergraduate education that the new curriculum entails; the students must be willing to accept the burden of responsibility which has been claimed for them, and which they have now been granted.

The spirit of common understanding which marked the framing of the new curriculum, and the affirmation of common concerns and a common respect implicit in its acceptance by the faculty, promise well for the future of the University.